

Sanctification

Introduction

To sanctify is to set apart for holy use, to separate out from the profane for the sacred (Hebrew, qadesh; Greek, hagiazo). As with justification, sanctification is the work of God. It is a work of grace based on the merit of Christ. Paul writes in Galatians 6:14, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Through the work of Christ, God separates the believer from sin for the purpose of holiness, which is accomplished as the believer follows after the Spirit putting to death the misdeeds of the body (See Romans 6:22; 8:1-14).

The entire Christian life depends on the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “...from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13,14). Peter also wrote that we are “God’s elect...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by His blood” (1 Peter 1:1,2). What then is involved in this sanctifying work of the Spirit in the believer? The full breadth of that work includes two dimensions. The first is initial sanctification that is positional in Christ and occurs when a person receives Jesus Christ as Savior. The second is the experiential dimension that is expected and commanded of Christians. For example, note Paul’s words in Philippians 2:12, “...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” The moment one accepts Christ as Savior the believer dies to sin and becomes alive to holiness (Romans 6:2-4). Then Paul commands Christians to keep on counting themselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11). Christians should stop letting this age squeeze them into its mold but should continue permitting themselves to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2). Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24).

I. Initial Sanctification

To understand the full implication of what the work of sanctification includes, we must first appreciate the biblical truth involving our identification with Christ in His death on the cross. He not only died as our Redeemer, but He also died as our substitutionary Representative, paying the price for our sins. In Christ therefore, God sees every believer as being crucified with His Son and hence as a saint positionally sanctified in Him (Romans 6:6,7; 1 Cor. 1:30, 6:11; Galatians 2:20). Paul writes that God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin on behalf of us in order that we ourselves might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). The idea is that the Christian’s position in the mind of God is that of a person who died with Christ and is positionally sanctified. In God’s sight the Christian is viewed as never having sinned. Thus even the

carnal Christians in Corinth (1 Cor. 3:1) could be truthfully called saints earlier in Paul's letter (1 Cor. 1:2). However, one cannot read the New Testament or observe the lives of some Christians without concluding that not every Christian who is indwelt by the Spirit is "filled with the Holy Spirit," that is, living according to His controlling leadership. It is a fact of the Bible that every Christian is indwelt by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19,20) but not all are controlled by Him. (See Romans 7:14; Hebrews 5:11-6:12)

II. Experiential Sanctification

Positional sanctification, consequently, must be translated into one's own personal life experience by the help of the Holy Spirit via the Word of God (John 17:17). This is that to which Paul refers when he writes to the Christians in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "This is the will of God, even your sanctification." While this experiential dimension of sanctification begins at conversion, substantial progress in holiness occurs when a believer willfully makes a complete commitment to the Lord's control (Rom. 6:12,13; 12:1). Experiential sanctification involves three aspects.

A. The Decisive Aspect.

The decisive aspect is commanded by Paul of the Roman Christians in Romans 6:12,13 and exhorted in 12:1. He describes this aspect as the presenting of one's bodily members to God by a determined effort of will. This placing of one's bodily members at God's disposal can begin at conversion, as it did for the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:44-46). However, more often than not it begins with a resolute decision subsequent to salvation to make Christ Lord of every area of one's life. This decision usually follows a period of education and spiritual growth until one comes to realize that there is more to the Christian life than what has been experienced to that point in time. This is what Jesus had in mind when He said in Matthew 16:24 that, if anyone wished to come after Him as a disciple, he would have to deny himself and take up his cross, thus putting himself at God's disposal. Some call this decision "dedication," "consecration," or "a crisis experience." This is the point when, to the best of one's ability and with all the light available at the time, a person gives all of one's self and bodily members over to God's control and God then "baptizes" or "fills" the individual with His Spirit. (Compare Acts 1:5 and Acts 2:4.)

B. The Progressive Aspect.

From then on, the progressive aspect of sanctification continues at a more rapid pace. In Romans 6:11 Paul commands the Christians to count themselves dead repeatedly to sinning of all kinds and alive unto God every time they are tempted to sin. In Romans 12:2, believers are to stop letting this age conform them into its likeness and they are to continue letting the Lord transform their living by the renewing of their minds. As Jesus stated in Matthew 16:24, they are to continue following and obeying Him and His teachings. The intent is that the longer we live this progressively holy life, the more our lives will become conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ, God's Son (Rom. 8:29). We are to continue being filled and controlled by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

The Spirit-filled life is a life lived under the control of the Holy Spirit using the Bible as one's guide. This does not mean that a Spirit-filled Christian will never yield to

temptation and sin. However, if one should sin, confession should be made immediately and personal forgiveness accepted by faith (1 John 1:9-2:2). It is to be remembered that the fruit of the Spirit does not come automatically to people still involved with sin dwelling in their members (Rom. 7:14-25). The fullness of the Spirit does not make obedience to God an automatic thing nor the demonstration of the fruit of the Spirit something easy to exhibit on all occasions. However, this does not mean that the ideal should not be one's aim. New circumstances may call for renewed dedication of one's body to God as a living sacrifice when the Spirit leads and as the Christian matures in Christ. All of this involves lifelong growth and development in Christ-likeness through the continual sanctifying work of the Spirit by the truth of His Word (John 17:17).

C. The Completed Aspect.

Finally, the sanctifying work of the Spirit is completed, in one sense, at the time of physical death when the spirit of the Christian enters into the Lord's presence (Heb. 12:22, 23). However, sanctification will be completed in the final sense, when the Christian's body is resurrected and glorified (1 Cor. 15:51-54; Phil. 3:20,21; 1 John 3:2). Then the believer will attain complete sanctification for all eternity.

Summary

To reiterate, the Holy Spirit enters and indwells the life of an individual at his/her conversion, and sainthood begins positionally (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19,20). The Spirit takes over control in many Christians' lives in a decisive moment of sanctification when that Christian permits the Spirit total control. From then on, the indwelt and controlled Christian is expected to continue walking according to the Spirit's leading via God's Word, the Bible (John 17:17). This filling or controlling is something that is intended to continue in the sanctified Christian's life (Eph. 5:18; 2 Cor. 7:1) until it is completed, in one sense, at the Christian's death (Heb. 12:22,23) and, in the final sense, at Christ's return when the Christian receives a resurrection body (Phil. 3:12-14, 20, 21).

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